How to Respond to Religious Pluralism? Orthodoxy and the “New Comparative Theology”

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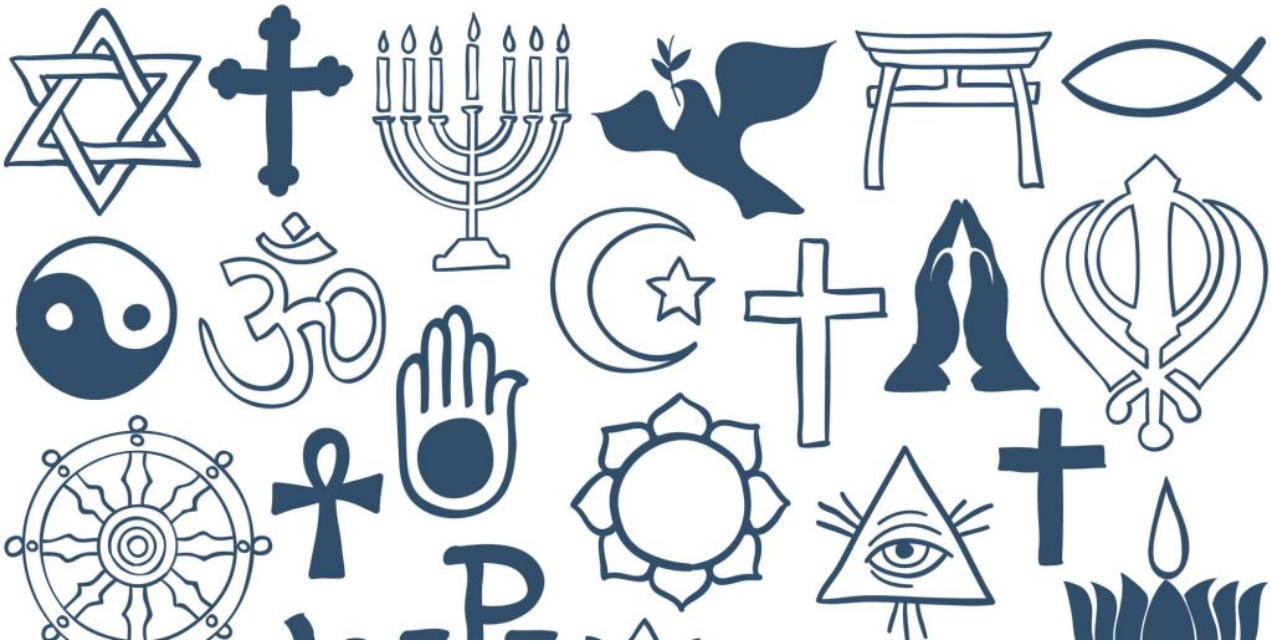

How should Christians engage other religious traditions? Today religious diversity has never been closer to home. Our uncle might be Jewish, our neighbor Muslim, and our sister engaged in sincere Buddhist practice. Then there is the fact that Americans are increasingly willing to borrow religious beliefs and practices deemed beneficial—yoga from Hindus, mindfulness from Buddhists, and the Jesus Prayer from Orthodox. Whether we like it or not, in the wake of our Baby Boomer parents, we do in fact live in a spiritual marketplace. Such eclecticism does not in itself make one a Buddhist, Hindu, or Orthodox, of course, but it does demonstrate an increasing permeability between religious traditions. Yet for all this admixing, some seventy-percent of Americans still identify as Christian, while seven percent identify as Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist. Meanwhile, according to The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, no less than one fifth of Americans are now religiously “unaffiliated.” These so-called “nones” cause scholars, clergy, and pundits to scratch their heads or wring their hands. We move, as ever, into uncharted waters.

How to respond? We can pine for simpler times. We can try to batten down our hatches, attempting to be “untainted” by such religious difference, remaining polite but fundamentally uninterested in the religious lives of relatives, friends, or neighbors. Such difference can be frightening, after all. Many who converted to Orthodoxy have experienced this same attitude from our closest relatives, who responded to our conversion with a combination of bewilderment, fear, or even repulsion.

Yet Christian love compels us to a different response. After all, “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4: 18), and as our prayers proclaim at nearly every divine invocation, the Holy Spirit “is everywhere present and filling all things.” Reflection on this mystery, coupled with a sensitivity borne of being Orthodox in America—a unique kind of “religious other”—should lead us to a stance of what I’ll call faithful openness towards non-Christians and non-Christian religions. Over the last century, as never before, Christian theologians have sought to theologically understand the meaning of religious diversity in a pursuit called the theology of religions. In a nutshell, a theology of religions seeks a theological understanding of religious diversity. Historically, both inclusivist and exclusivist tendencies have characterized Orthodox theology. Inclusivists generally maintain that salvation can occur through Christ beyond the boundaries of the faith, while exclusivists argue that only Christ saves through explicitly Christian means. On the one inclusivist hand we have the likes of Justin Martyr and Ireneaus in the early church, and Sergius Bulgakov and Anastasios Yannoulatos in the modern era; on the other exclusivist hand we have Tertullian in the second century and Seraphim Rose in the 20th. Still others, the historical exception to be sure, have exhibited a pluralist view wherein multiple religious paths are affirmed in themselves. Phillip Sherrard is one twentieth century example.

Theology of religions can seem like so many ways to try to square a circle, but if we can at least agree that God works beyond the walls of the Church, can we affirm that God is *somehow* and in *some way* active in the world’s religions and with their adherents? Many say, yes, but wish to probe more deeply. This is where the work of comparative theology presents a promising path forward.

Comparative theology, or the “new comparative theology,” as it has been christened, is a confessional theology seeking to explore the meaning of one’s own religious tradition by critical investigation of another or aspects of another. While it utilizes the most sophisticated knowledge of such traditions, it is not a disinterested endeavor where the comparer seeks to bracket the truth claims of her own religious worldview. Rather, this work is done faithfully, moving beyond one’s own tradition, asking questions of the religious other’s texts or practices, seeking correlations and novel insights, then returning to examine what has been discovered in the process. One of the chief architects of the new comparative theology, the Jesuit Francis X. Clooney, has argued and demonstrated that these projects should be particular and focused, as opposed to general with broad and often unhelpful (because too broad) comparisons between, say, Christianity and Buddhism, or Hinduism and Islam. (Imagine the sheer diversity concealed by these abstractions!) Clooney’s particularist method itself avoids the hegemony of generalities in favor of honoring the intricacies of systems of thought, lineages, practices, or persons. It can be cognizant of power imbalances and the ways that Christians have often distorted other religious traditions for their own ends. In short, constructive comparative theology can be a just way of doing theology in a pluralist environment. In all this I see elements of comparative theology that Orthodox can well affirm and apply. And there is much that our tradition can contribute.

Orthodoxy can itself benefit from the new comparative theology precisely because it requires not just curiosity but a degree of cosmopolitanism. As a scholar of South Asian religions, I find that the more one engages the religions, the more our inter-ecclesial struggles seem trivial. When we begin to speak only to ourselves about ourselves, the triumph of Orthodoxy becomes the repulsive triumphalism of Orthodoxy. And ironically, in a time when there exists unparalleled freedom to engage across geographic, religious, and ideological borders, many Orthodox seek to erect higher walls. This is to retreat, not advance. Many have taken shelter in the ancient faith without attending to her full history, thinking they have discovered a fortification against the very world for which the Word became incarnate. This is an abdication of our common priestly vocation.

Is Christ diminished by interreligious engagement or by the comparative theological project of which it is a part? Let me offer this interpretation: Our understanding of God is not diminished but expanded—as can be our understanding of the Church. “Oh the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways” (Romans 11:33)!

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